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WHY I BECAME AN AMBASSADOR OF THE BULGARIAN CULTURE ABROAD: THREE FORMER EMIRATES FLIGHT ATTENDANTS

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Abstract: *The United Arab Emirates are considered the largest recipient of labour migration in the world, as the share of immigrants is 90% of the total population or about 8 million people. But the UAE maintains an immigration policy to attract temporary workers, and citizenship is not granted even to children born there to non-citizen parents. According to unofficial data, about 5,000-6,000 Bulgarians live in the UAE – in Dubai and Abu Dhabi. At the beginning of the 21st century, many aviators came – pilots and flight attendants in the two largest airlines of the UAE – Emirates and Etihad. At the moment, some of the oldest migrants have been there for about 18-20 years and work in the field of sports and arts, mainly music.*

In the article, the authors tell the stories of three women who used to work as flight attendants at Emirates, and today they are among the pillars of the Bulgarian communities in Dubai and Abu Dhabi. In recent years, for various reasons, they have chosen not to return to Bulgaria, but are actively involved in presenting Bulgaria abroad and building Bulgarian migrant communities. The research is based on semi-structured interviews conducted in February 2022 with the respondents in connection with their function for the consolidation of the Bulgarian communities.

Keywords: Migration; Migrants; Temporary labour migration; Cultural heritage instrumentalization; UAE; Dubai; Abu Dhabi; Aviators.

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Migrants are often locked between nostalgia, specific patriotism, peculiar lines of communication with the homeland and a desire for life outside of it, for travels, for pushing away from the familiar and the native. One of the ways for instrumentalisation – overcoming, usage and management – of this tension is the creation, inclusion and support of migrant communities, institutions and organisations. People who are usually in a leadership position in these organisations are thought of as community leaders due to their activity which builds and consolidates the community in question. This article is dedicated to such individuals, but they are chosen specifically for the purpose that the tension between nostalgia and patriotism, on the one hand, and the desire for experiences and accomplishments beyond the homeland, on the other, are strained to an extreme degree. They leave Bulgaria not for economic reasons, but in search of adventures and exotics, they do not return permanently, but their lives are tied to the construction of a set of representational processes, which we can call migrant cultural heritage.

In the spring of 2022, we visited the Bulgarian communities in Dubai and Abu Dhabi, where they have developed cultural and educational activities, economic and social activities for years. In both cities, there are also Bulgarian state representatives. Our goal were conversations with the leaders of the communities – teachers, ethnicity entrepreneurs, diplomats, activists, but it made a strong impression on us that very often our informants turned out to be former flight attendants of the Emirates Airlines. We noticed that several women who had such a career are currently among the significant figures of the Bulgarian community and make an important contribution to its building and maintenance, as well as to the construction of the Bulgarian cultural heritage in the UAE.

The Emirates Cabin Crew team nowadays consists of a mix from over 130 countries and all together they speak more than 50 languages¹. Emirates are among the most desirable employers in aviation, especially for cabin crew. Among the main reasons for applying to this company are the opportunity to travel, the life in an exotic place like Dubai, the good payment, the prestige of the position. There are no public statistics on exactly how many Bulgarians are working and have worked in the Emirates or in the airline services in the UAE in general, because there are many in the other big company – Etihad Airways, located in Abu Dhabi, but in conversations with Bulgarians in the two big emirates they constantly mention, that this is a characteristic branch for Bulgarians.

In this article², we would like to tell the stories of three women who used to work as flight attendants at Emirates, and today they are among the pillars of the Bulgarian communities in Dubai and Abu Dhabi. All three are between 30 and 40 years old, with different higher education backgrounds. They worked at Emirates before they turned 30, and then implemented other life strategies. All of them are proud of their work at Emirates and talk about it in detail, all of them have at least one photo in their uniforms which can be found on their social profiles, regardless of how active they are on social networks. In recent years, for various reasons, they have chosen not to return to Bulgaria, but are actively involved in presenting Bulgaria abroad and building Bulgarian migrant communities. We will look at the cases separately, after which we will try to outline several important observations that apply not only to the individuals in question, but also – in our opinion – to the attitude towards the native among migrants in general.

We conducted semi-structured interviews with the respondents³ in connection with their function

¹ The Emirates Cabin Crew team nowadays consists of a mix from over 130 countries and all together they speak more than 50 languages.

² A shortened version of the contribution was presented at the Interdisciplinary Scientific Hybrid Conference “Migration, Cultural Diversity and Life Prospects under Conditions of Global Crisis” held in Sofia, November 24-25, 2022.

³ The interviews with the three respondents were conducted in February 2002 within our field research in the UAE. It was done within the project “Cultural Heritage and Institutionalization of Bulgarian Historical and Contemporary Migrant Communities outside Europe” (2018-2023), funded by the National Science Fund at the Bulgarian Ministry of Education and Science. Our field and bibliographic work on the project, as well as our previous research on the Bulgarian migrant communities in Europe and the USA in the period 2014-2017 (see migrantheritage.com), provided us with a basis for analysing the regarded cases. These three cases draw our attention among others because they could hardly find a parallel in other countries. Our observations confirm the fact that the majority of active, committed and prominent members of the Bulgarian migrant communities around the world are women. They share not common social status, education or occupation but the ambition and desire to transmit and popularize the Bulgarian cultural heritage in the family, in the very community and among the host society. What is interesting about the UAE, which prompted us to look into the problem in detail and to trace whether it is relevant to their further life development, is precisely the common or similar work history of active women in the community. In addition to the interviews, archival and bibliographic materials, Internet sources, video and photo collections on social networks were used to contextualize the topic.

for the consolidation of the Bulgarian communities. The topic of their previous work at Emirates, their motivation to work there, as well as the importance of this work position for the present is not specifically commented on – these questions surface in the conversation, which also proves their importance to the respondents. We also monitored the presence of the three individuals on social networks and had ongoing online communication with them.

Bulgarian migrants to the UAE

The United Arab Emirates are considered the largest recipient of labour migration in the world, as the share of immigrants is 90% of the total population (Strabac et. al 2018) or about 8 million people. But the UAE maintains an immigration policy to attract temporary workers, and citizenship is not granted even to children born there to non-citizen parents (Valenta et al. 2020). Thus, despite the potential long-term of the residence, foreigners cannot settle there, cannot benefit from the pension system and cannot live in the UAE, if they or their spouses do not currently have an employment contract and, accordingly, a visa (Errichiello, Nyhagen, 2021; Hvidt, 2019; Pagès-El Karoui & Yeoh, 2020). Migrants from Europe and the USA are relatively few compared to those from Asia and nearby regions of Africa. Therefore, anthropological and sociological studies consider mainly exploitation, abuses and marginalization of economic, often irregular, migrants from Asia (India, Pakistan, etc.) (Strabac et. al, 2018) and rarely high qualified migrants from West Europe (Walsh 2009) and the USA. The biggest migrant boom was between 2005 and 2010, when many Bulgarian specialists also went there, most of whom no longer live in the UAE. After 2015, when a crisis began in the region due to the collapse of oil prices, the volume of migration to the UAE also greatly decreased, many Bulgarians decided to allocate to other countries. A decrease is also visible during the coronavirus pandemic (2020-2022).

According to unofficial data, about 5,000-6,000 Bulgarians live in the UAE, with 4,000 of them concentrated in the largest and most prosperous city of Dubai, about 1,000 are in the capital Abu Dhabi and an even smaller part – in other emirates, such as Sharjah, for example (an emirate located very close to Dubai, where Bulgarians can benefit from the “resources” of the Bulgarian community without the need to open their own institutions). This is the first

survey of the Bulgarian migrants to the UAE and to Middle East in general and although it was done not long ago, some of the respondents do not live in the UAE anymore. They have not returned to Bulgaria but moved to other European countries. However, the migrant institutions and forms of consolidation did not change and the social actors we consider in this contribution are still active.

It is difficult to talk about old and new Bulgarian migration to the UAE, because the vast majority of previous migrants have already left (Errichiello, Nyhagen 2021). They were mostly from the 1980s, when Bulgarian construction engineers from *Technoimportstroy* and *Bulgarproject* worked in Abu Dhabi. Then, at the beginning of the 21st century, many aviators came – pilots and flight attendants in the two largest airlines of the UAE – Emirates and Etihad. At the moment, some of the oldest migrants have been there for about 18-20 years and work in the field of sports and arts, mainly music. The rest are highly-qualified employees hired in the field of finance and IT, entrepreneurs in construction and in high-tech businesses, real estate agents, doctors, etc. The established pattern is for the husband to work while the wife stays at home, although there are some exceptions.

There are two Bulgarian representations in the country – Consulate General in Dubai, opened in 2001, and Embassy in Abu Dhabi since 2018. In the 1980s, a Bulgarian international trade office functioned in Dubai, but its activity was suspended by a decision of the government from December 1991. In both cities there are also Bulgarian communities with their own organisations and forms of consolidation, which we will discuss. Our report is based on ethnographic research in Dubai and Abu Dhabi in February 2022, on observations of the online communication channels of Bulgarians in both cities, and on various media materials.

CASE 1: BULGARIAN TRADITIONAL PRODUCTS ON THE INTERNATIONAL MARKET

The first case is characterised by a very strong desire to promote Bulgaria and Bulgarian products abroad, specifically in the United Arab Emirates, and has a clear economic goal. This is the own business of N.O.⁴, a former Emirates flight attendant. During her service at the airline company, she has already decided to start an activity related to the

⁴ In order to preserve the anonymity of the respondents, we present them with initials. We express our gratitude to them for sharing their biographical data, experiences, plans and information.

sale of Bulgarian products, or as she herself says “started as a personal ambition to advertise unique Bulgarian products”. At first, she had an idea that it was Bulgarian cheese or bee honey⁵, but both were already imported and sold in the stores there. That is why she turned to natural Bulgarian cosmetics and more specifically to Bulgarian rose and lavender water. She started in 2015 by collaborating with small family-run companies with the idea to support small businesses like the one she herself intended to run. It turns out that her first customers who are interested in the products are namely her fellow flight attendants. Due to the increased interest and driven by a strong desire to succeed in her venture, she decided that it was time to devote herself to her new proprietorship and left the Emirates. She put a lot of effort into finding a suitable partner company, as well as a distributor of the cosmetic products in Dubai. She also contacted a local model influencer who helped her advertise online and by taking part in various trade fairs. In addition to them, the cosmetics is also sold in the local pharmacy network. She also founded a company and called it Bulgarian Rose Beauty.

Although she has long since left her job based in Dubai, N.O. continues to live in the emirate, but regularly travels to Bulgaria to meet with her trade partners. During the COVID-19 pandemic, these meetings are more difficult to conduct, but she herself notes that her sales have increased. She is gradually expanding the range of products, as well as making sales through her website.

Nadya’s motivation has expanded in a few directions. On the one hand, her aim is to promote Bulgaria, its history, cultural heritage, natural resources. On the other hand, stands her desire to prove that the Bulgarian abroad is not only a worker, but can also be an entrepreneur and an employer. She believes that through her business she supports, albeit on a small scale, the Bulgarian economy, and by cooperating with a Bulgarian company, she gives the opportunity to “a Bulgarian rose producer to offer his product on the foreign market, which contributes to increasing the export of our country and the development of its economy. Because what I am trying to do is something good, very good, from which not only I can win, but also our country and all Bulgarians around the world!!!”⁶.

CASE 2: BULGARIAN TRADITIONAL DANCES CONSOLIDATING THE MIGRANT COMMUNITY

The second case is the one of D.K., who came to work as a flight attendant in Dubai 14 years ago. After leaving the airline company, she continued to live in the emirate with her family, but the nostalgia for Bulgaria and the lack of social contacts with Bulgarians and Bulgarian events in the emirate triggered her to initiate the creation of the folk-dance formation “Zdravets”. This Bulgarian club was founded in 2014 at an informal gathering of friends. D.K. is the person in charge of recruiting members and spreading the word about the newly-created dance club. For this purpose, she uses the social networks, mostly Facebook. Thus, she managed to gather some twenty people who formed the first group. Over the years, they grew, changed various teachers, organised a children’s dance club called “Zdravcheta”. D.K. is the main “engine” of the club, who takes care of the organisation of festive events, the connection with other institutions (local and Bulgarian), participation in various initiatives. “Zdravets” regularly organise concerts on various occasions such as St. George’s Day, Christmas, 3rd of March, as well as other cultural events – such as Easter egg painting workshops. In the form of informal meetings, they also hold celebrations, joint picnics, book exchanges for the National Enlighteners Day, etc. They organise events together with Dubai Women’s Voices, for example, a multinational women’s choir performing songs from different parts of the world, including Bulgaria. They also participate in local international events, such as the Peoples’ Day concert at the Dubai International Academy. They are in close cooperation with the two Bulgarian schools in the UAE, “Bulgarche” (Dubai) and “Kambana” (Abu Dhabi), with which they jointly organised the 1st of March and 3rd of March celebrations held in 2019 under the title “Bulgaria in the Hearts”. The event is supported by the Bulgarian Embassy and the Bulgarian Consulate. In addition to a diverse folk music and dance program, the celebration also includes a “martenitsa” workshop, an exhibition of drawings on the theme “Bulgaria in the Hearts”, the work of students from both schools. A similar initiative, again the work of the “Zdravets” club, was held three years earlier, but on the occasion of 24th of May. During

⁵ Honey is sold by the company Princess Bee, which is also owned by a former Bulgarian flight attendant (Violeta) and her Syrian husband. Her family is engaged in bee-keeping in Bulgaria and imports honey to the UAE. It is sold every weekend at the Ripe Market in Dubai, as well as in their online store at www.princessbee.eu.

⁶ Facebook.com – Bulgarians in Dubai UAE.

the pandemic, rehearsals and all cultural initiatives stopped. Due to the extremely strict measures in the UAE, they could not organise any events. Gradually, in the last months, they restarted their active work by organising an event for the National Enlighteners Day.

D.K.'s main motivation for maintaining and promoting the dance club is her desire to create a community. A community to support Bulgarian culture in Dubai and to be open to all members of the Bulgarian diaspora. Initially, she planned and founded an organisation that would deal with all kinds of cultural events for Bulgarians in the UAE, as well as to create a library with Bulgarian books. But it turned out to be very difficult, because unlike the dance group, which is attended regularly for a very modest fee which is used for paying for the rehearsal room, the events organised with larger investments have to rely on people's sporadic visits. She personally believes that in fact *"folk groups are the strongest link for the community because people can literally experience it"*.

CASE 3: BULGARIAN SCHOOL MAINTAINING NATION IN MIGRATION

Our third case is from Abu Dhabi – V.M., who came to the United Arab Emirates also as a flight attendant at Emirates, from where she also met our first case – N.O. She met her Bulgarian husband in Dubai, where they lived together, then decided to return to Bulgaria, but eventually came back as they could not get used to the different standard. She says, *"you see that the standard here is very high, some cannot get used to the difference in Bulgaria. My family is such a case – we came back, but we realised that it was too soon for us."* Although her child is not of school age, she became part of the team of the Bulgarian school "Kambana" in Abu Dhabi in order to get involved in the Bulgarian community and support the activities of the school, which has a constant need for teachers.

The Bulgarian Sunday school "Kambana" opened its doors in Abu Dhabi in 2016, two years before the embassy was opened there, and since 2018 it started receiving subsidies from the Ministry of Education and Science of Bulgaria. Nearly 40 children are taught there – some have the Bulgarian language as their native language, others have studied in Bulgaria or in another country, some are from mixed bilingual families, and also there are some families of Bulgarian citizens of non-Bulgarian origin (mainly from the Middle East). Initially, the school was registered as part of a music centre, but during the

pandemic it was transferred to a sports club, and the director became the owner of the club. This institutional transfer was necessary because the school should be registered to an independent legal entity, and in Abu Dhabi the association by religious and national characteristics is prohibited. Until recently, classes were held on Fridays, but in 2021 Abu Dhabi switched to a "European" work week with Saturday and Sunday as non-working days.

Over the years, the school has established itself as almost the only centre around which the Bulgarian community unites, as it organises events on the occasion of the most important Bulgarian holidays, such as March 1st and 3rd, May 24th, November 1st, Easter and Christmas. Because of the foreign religious environment and out of respect for mixed families, the celebrations are in the spirit of national and folklore, without emphasising the religious side in any way. For example, for the Christmas and New Year holidays, the children were taught Christmas carols, played kuker games, made survachki, focused more on the image of Santa Claus than on the message of Christmas. There are several highlights of the celebrations – the national heroes and enlighteners, whose images and biographies are often woven into the children's performances; traditional culture – through traditional cuisine accompanying all gatherings, through traditional clothing as an element in stage costumes, through the making of elements of traditional rituals – kuker masks, martenitsas, survachki, egg painting, etc.; the Bulgarian alphabet – especially on the occasion of May 24th, in various forms, attention is paid to the differences in writing of the letters and to the historical development of the Cyrillic alphabet.

It is typical for Bulgarian women in Abu Dhabi, and in the UAE in general, that they accompany their husbands, who work under contract with international companies. Therefore, women usually devote their free time to charity, social activities, raising children and self-improvement. V.M. teaches the elementary school students where they get to know the Bulgarian language. She told us that they often have students from mixed families for whom Bulgarian is a second, third or even fourth language, that they have first-graders who are older, but are now starting to learn Bulgarian and she has to work with them very intensively. There are many in-depth observations on Bulgarian proficiency among children from mono-national Bulgarian, mono-national foreign and mixed marriages, as well as on Bulgarian education in multiple countries, as the children who study at "Kambana" in Abu Dhabi have often been to other countries and Bulgarian Sunday schools in the past.

V.M. is well acquainted with the Bulgarian community in the UAE, she knows the main organisers of the school in Dubai, of folk dances in the recent past and now, with Bulgarian musicians in the Emirates, with Bulgarian companies and their policies to support Bulgarian schools. She finds it important that the Bulgarian community is well positioned, although the unification of national and religious principles is not well accepted in the country, and that the Bulgarian community includes many Muslim mixed families. She makes efforts for the entry of the Bulgarian school into the multicultural centre of Abu Dhabi, which is achieved by celebrating the Cyrillic alphabet on the occasion of May 24th. In the Emirates, the Cyrillic alphabet is clearly not perceived as an ethnic-religious feature, but as a civilization achievement significant for all of humanity. She believes that the presentation of Bulgarian culture abroad should be aimed at the Bulgarians who live there, and not at its potential admirers among foreigners. It is her dream that the Bulgarian state will start supporting the presentation of the achievements of Bulgarian modern culture abroad, so that Bulgarians who have chosen to live outside their homeland can keep up with what is happening at home.

CONCLUSIONS

In the three cases, although addressed to Bulgarian culture and traditions, the two different methods – business and amateur – are clearly distinguished. Without necessarily having a direct connection, businesswoman N.O. is the only one who does not have children, as well as the only one who does not work for charity and community-building purposes. On the other hand, she is the one that most directly and quickly constructs the image of Bulgaria in the host country, and this, regardless of its economic effect, places her in a different category compared to the other three. Although they all try to bring Bulgarian culture, and in particular the activities related to it, in front of the local audience, only for N.O. it is a priority. However, we can propose the hypothesis that for all three women the appeal of Bulgaria brings in capital – for Nadya financial, and for the others – social.

We will return to the fact that all three love travels, exotics, multiculturalism – this is their motivation to work in the Emirates, but also to stay abroad. All three declared in some way that their lives are no

longer connected with Bulgaria, although they like to go home and be with their relatives. For them, the Bulgarian, excluding the natural sights (the mountain experience that those in Dubai long for), which could not be moved, is something portable, capturing only the beauty of tradition, carrying the romance of the native. The cuisine, the traditions, the language, the dances are the part of Bulgaria that they need.

It seems to us that it would not be an exaggeration to imagine these three active, young, enterprising, adventurous, educated and well-integrated women in the host society and the Bulgarian migrant communities as arranging beautiful Bulgarian samples in the shop window of the world. With selected means and in front of a multicultural audience, they build the desired image of Bulgaria. And as was mentioned above, although in the laboratory of the personal life path and motivation, the contradiction between a lack of nostalgia and a desire to return, on the one hand, and giving time and energy for a constructed preservation and promotion of Bulgaria, on the other hand, similar processes are characteristic of migrant leaders and communities in general.

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